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House of Assembly
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LOWER LAKES AND COORONG

Mr PEDERICK (Hammond) (15:43): I rise today to speak about the Lower Lakes and Coorong and, in particular, the scoping study into the future management of Lake Albert. This is a matter I have raised a number of times in this place and it is extremely disappointing to see the state government's lack of urgency in the completion of this important study.

By way of background, the scoping study was based, in part, on an initiative of the Meningie Narrung Lakes Irrigators Association, the five-point plan for the future management of the Lower Lakes and Coorong, and this plan consisted of five main points:

1. Remove the Narrung ferry causeway.
2. Remove the Narrung bund in its entirety.
3. Dredge the whole of the Narrung Narrows.
4. Install a connector at the southern end of Lake Albert to the Coorong.
5. Return natural flows to the southern end of the Coorong.

Formed in 2002, the Meningie Narrung Lakes Irrigators Association is a small group of local farmers who once derived the majority of their income from the waters of Lake Albert and who are concerned about supply, quality of, and access to water from the Lower Lakes.

We have all witnessed the debilitating effects on the environment and our river communities of what is now acknowledged as over-allocation of the river's resources. Throughout the entire Murray-Darling Basin we have been witness to the devastation and suffering caused by a prolonged drought and then a succession of weather events. Those who derive income from the river Murray, particularly below Lock 1, are acutely aware of what happens upstream. Those below Lock 1 will be the eventual recipients of whatever occurs upstream and the effects on the environment and river communities, such as Meningie, into the future.

During the drought period when the water level in Lake Albert fell to half a metre below sea level or minus 0.5 metres AHD (Australian Height Datum), everyone was impacted, and this was at least 1.25 metres below what is set as the standard setting of plus 0.75. Just as a snapshot, the 21 dairy operations in the area got down to three at one point. There was enormous economic stress on the entire area. There are reports from community service providers that there was a significant increase in mental health problems, and numbers at the Meningie Area School dropped from 278 to 160.

The Murray-Darling Basin has essentially recovered and the river is returning to health. Below Lock 1, however, the Coorong and Lower Lakes have not. Salinity levels remain high and past failed infrastructure initiatives continue to impact. The Coorong and Lower Lakes, quite simply, require attention, and to learn that the state government's scoping study has been stalled by six months is of great concern.

The scoping study, which receives state and federal government funding support to the tune of \$740,000, was due to be handed down in December 2013. At a presentation in Meningie in

December, the Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources explained the completion date would be extended to March 2014. It is now June. Why has this study stalled by six months? I will tell you why.

The government does not want potential improved management actions, such as a proposed connector between Lake Albert and the Coorong, because that would impact the amount of revenue made from selling potable water for commercial use to irrigators who cannot utilise the lakes due to the high salinity levels. This government knows the ongoing return received from the use of pipelines by local primary producers for the delivery of potable and irrigation water supplies will ultimately be impacted if infrastructure designed to improve water quality is implemented.

I am aware that a number of primary producers are looking to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars in the 30-kilometre irrigation pipeline from the lake, allowing them to pump water a lot cheaper out of the lake than the \$3.23 per kilolitre paid to SA Water, and some of these pipes have already been put in. This government knows this is only viable if the water quality is improved and, as the scoping study report will suggest, the only way to do that is through the installation of a connector between Lake Albert and the Coorong.

Restoring Lake Albert to health would create 273 jobs and add \$30.7 million to the regional economy, a recent Regional Development Australia (RDA) study has found. In addition to this, in a recent letter I received, the Meningie Narrung Lakes Irrigators Association is not privy to the final scoping study report. The association fears there are many aspects of detail they will not be consulted on and these people know the Lower Lakes and Coorong better than anyone. Why this government does not want to help primary producers grow jobs, increase regional economic activity and support regional South Australia has baffled me since I first entered this place and it continues to do so.

Time expired.

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